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SUBJECT: DON'T COME WITH ANY DEMANDS SAYS BAINIMARAMA

¶1. Summary: Having raised hopes by inviting members of Fiji's various political parties to a political dialogue on October 27, interim Prime Minister Bainimarama this week reverted to form, warning invitees not to demand elections in 2007 and advising them to read the recent High Court decision and Peoples' Charter prior to attending. Bainimarama also announced his intention to begin dialogue with Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs, which he disbanded in 2007 after it refused to endorse his nomination for Vice President. Interim government (IG) efforts to secure popular support for the Peoples' Charter continue to struggle, occasioning the NCBBF Secretariat to instruct outreach teams - which generally include police or military officers - to go to schools and "house to house." A prominent Fiji lawyer speaks out in Australia about a climate of "retribution and revenge" in Fiji prompting speculation of retaliatory measures by the IG. Meanwhile, the creeping militarization of Fiji's society continues. End summary.

Political Dialogue Set for October 27

¶2. On October 16, Bainimarama wrote to 15 registered political parties proposing a meeting of political party leaders, with an open and flexible framework, having the overall objective of moving Fiji back to democracy through broad based consensus. Invitees included Fiji's largest political parties, ousted PM Laisenia Qarase's Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) party, and former Interim Finance Minister Mahendra Chaudhry's Fiji Labor Party (FLP), as well as new and smaller parties that have contested but never won parliamentary seats. A majority of Fiji's political parties are expected to attend. The recent High Court decision and continuing poor turnout at public meetings to promote the IG's Peoples' Charter may have prompted the proposal.

¶3. (SBU) This proposed political dialogue represents a change in strategy for Bainimarama, who long maintained that he would only permit political dialogue after the people of Fiji (voluntarily) accept the Peoples' Charter. As recently as August, when the IG launched its public outreach campaign for the Charter, Bainimarama said that unless and until the Charter is accepted, there would be no political dialogue, and consequently no elections. Comment: The foregoing comments are difficult to square with Bainimarama's continuous assertions that the RFMF will not "dictatorially impose" the Peoples' Charter on the people of Fiji. End comment.

¶4. (SBU) Not surprisingly, Bainimarama's public statements have not matched the conciliatory tone of the invitations. During recent media interviews, he suggested that the IG would dictate the agenda, advising prospective attendees to read the recent High Court decision affirming the legality of the IG as well as the Peoples' Charter. He also commented that if some political leaders were going to advocate for elections in 2009, they may as well not attend. Those opposed to electoral reforms were advised they are not welcome to attend either. Comment: Such comments do not bode well for open and inclusive dialogue. End comment.

Mending Fences with Fiji's High Chiefs?

¶5. Bainimarama said during a radio interview on October 22 that he plans to write to Fiji's traditional chiefs, requesting a dialogue to discuss the nation's future. Relations between many of Fiji's chiefs and the IG have long been sour. A prominent chief, when reached for comment, said only that Bainimarama had made a lot of

statements about Fiji's traditional chiefs, and some air would need to be cleared before any substantive dialogue could ensue.

Charter Outreach Campaign Still Fizzles

¶6. (SBU) Meanwhile, the IG's vast and expensive public outreach campaign struggles on. The SDL party, Fiji's Methodist Church, and 11 of 14 provincial councils remain steadfastly opposed to the Peoples' Charter. The Methodist Church recently announced that 40,000 of its members have signed forms rejecting the Charter. Perhaps responding to some lack of success, the NCBBF this week proposed sending outreach teams into Fiji's secondary schools to promote the Charter to students 18 years of age and over, and also urged more "house to house" visits by outreach teams, which now usually include soldiers and/or police officers. A NCBBF press release on October 23 boasts with no apparent sense of irony that outreach efforts targeting "NCBBF staff and Government officials" in Fiji's Western Division have met with great success.

¶7. (SBU) Some provinces, districts and villages heavily populated by indigenous Fijians have rejected the Charter process outright and prohibited visits by outreach teams. Most, however, have allowed teams to come in but sent clear messages that the local government follows the provincial council's decision to reject the Charter. Lack of public interest is a problem, and a recent case is instructive. A charter team recently visited Nadoi village in Rewa Province, not far from Suva, to discover that four people had turned up at the village hall to hear them. After house-to-house visits, the team ultimately secured 40 signatures in favor of the Charter.

¶8. (SBU) Comment: The vast sums of money being spent by the IG on Charter outreach activities remain perplexing in view of Bainimarama's confidence in the inevitability of the Charter's acceptance. Continuous press releases by the NCBBF that civil servants in medium-sized towns have endorsed the Charter only tend to suggest that support for the Charter is weak. The NCBBF certainly must know this. End Comment.

Fiji's Creeping Militarization

¶9. (SBU) And in the background, the creeping militarization of Fiji's society continues, with the steady encroachment of the military into all aspects of life in Fiji. The RFMF has complete control over all three disciplined forces - the Army, Police, and Prisons - which now fall under a Joint Command Center at the Suva Central Police Station. The RFMF controls Fiji's borders through the Immigration Department and mans airport checkpoints, helping to enforce travel bans imposed on IG opponents. Military personnel staff many government departments, and are in direct control of some, including the Justice Ministry and the Department of Information, and also serve on a number of statutory boards and boards of government commercial companies.

¶9. (SBU) Speaking in Canberra this week, former president of the Fiji Law Society Graham Leung said that a climate of fear and intimidation had taken hold in Fiji, muting criticism of the recent High Court decision on the legality of the IG. In addition to overt threats, the IG exacts retribution against its critics by imposing travel bans, and in Leung's case, by issuing a decree blackballing his law firm from work with the IG and related bodies. This pattern of revenge and intimidation of critics has resulted in timidity among the population and intelligentsia, and an unwillingness to openly criticize the High Court's decision, Leung said. Leung's comments received widespread media coverage in Fiji. What retaliatory measures the IG will take against Leung remain to be seen.

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